

A THRILLER
SHORT

EDITED BY
JAMES PATTERSON

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JAMES ROLLINS

KOWALSKI'S
IN LOVE



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suspense!***

***Originally published in THRILLER (2006),
edited by #1 New York Times bestselling author
James Patterson.***

In this Thriller Short from #1 *New York Times* bestselling writer, James Rollins, brings a story that's no love story, at least not in the traditional sense. Fans of Rollins's *Sigma Force* series know Joe Kowalski, a naval seaman with the heart of a hero, but lacking the brainpower to go with it. Kowalski stays in trouble and here readers will get to know a bit more about his backstory. One that illustrates something Kowalski seems to live by.

Dumb luck is better than no luck at all.

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JAMES ROLLINS

James Rollins's *Sandstorm* (2003) and *Map of Bones* (2004), were departures from his usual work. His prior thrillers were all stand-alones, with a separate cast of characters. But in these two, Rollins introduced his first series with recurring characters. He pursued that course based on input from his readers and from personal desire. For years, fans had contacted him and asked questions about various cast members from his earlier thrillers. What became of Ashley and Ben's baby after *Subterranean* (1999)? What is the next port of call for the crew of the *Deep Fathom* (2001)?

Eventually, Rollins came to realize that *he* wanted to know those answers, too. So he challenged himself to construct a series—something unique and distinct. He wanted to build a landscape of three-dimensional characters and create his own mythology of these people, to watch them grow over the course of the series, balancing personal lives and professional, some succeeding, some failing. Yet at the same time, Rollins refused to let go of his roots. Trained as a biologist with a degree in veterinary medicine, his new series, like his previous thrillers, folded scientific intrigue into stories of historical mystery. His new characters belong to *Sigma Force*, an elite team of ex-Special Forces soldiers retrained in scientific disciplines (what Rollins jokingly describes as “killer scientists who operate outside the rule of law”). Finally, from his background as a veterinarian, the occasional strange or exotic animal often plays a significant role in the plot.

And this short story is no exception.

Here, Rollins links his past to the present. He brings forward a minor character, one of his personal favorites, from his earlier stand-alone thriller *Ice Hunt* (2003). Joe Kowalski, a naval seaman, is best described as someone with the heart of a hero but lacking the brainpower to go with it. So how does Seaman Joe Kowalski end up being recruited by such an illustrious team as Sigma Force?

As they say, dumb luck is better than no luck at all.

KOWALSKI'S IN LOVE

He wasn't much to look at— even swinging upside down from a hog snare. Pug-nosed, razor-clipped muddy hair, a six-foot slab of beef hooked and hanging naked except for a pair of wet gray boxer shorts. His chest was crisscrossed with old scars, along with one jagged bloody scratch from collarbone to groin. His eyes shone wide and wild.

And with good reason.

Two minutes before, as Dr. Shay Rosauro unhitched her glide-chute on the nearby beach, she had heard his cries in the jungle and come to investigate. She had approached in secret, moving silently, spying from a short distance away, cloaked in shadow and foliage.

“Back off, you furry bastard!”

The man's curses never stopped, a continual flow tinged with a growled Bronx accent. Plainly he was American. Like herself.

She checked her watch.

8:33 a.m.

The island would explode in twenty-seven minutes.

The man would die sooner.

The more immediate threat came from the island's other inhabitants, drawn by the man's shouts. The average adult mandrill baboon weighed over a hundred pounds, most of that muscle and teeth. They were usually found in Africa. Never on a jungle island off the coast of Brazil. The yellow radio collars suggested the pack were once the research subjects belonging to Professor Salazar, shipped to this remote island for his experimental trials. *Mandrillus sphinx* were also considered *frugivorous*, meaning their diet consisted of fruits and nuts.

But not always.

They were also known to be opportunistic carnivores.

One of the baboons stalked around the trapped man: a charcoal-furred male of the species with a broad red snout bordered on both sides by ridges of blue. Such coloration indicated the fellow was the dominant male of the group. Females and subordinate males, all a duller brown, had settled to rumps or hung from neighboring branches. One bystander yawned, exposing a set of three-inch-long eyeteeth and a muzzle full of ripping incisors.

The male sniffed at the prisoner. A meaty fist swung at the inquisitive baboon, missed, and whished through empty air.

The male baboon reared on its hind legs and howled, lips peeling back from its muzzle to expose the full length of its yellow fangs. An impressive and horrifying display. The other baboons edged closer.

Shay stepped into the clearing, drawing all eyes. She lifted her hand

and pressed the button on her sonic device, nicknamed a *shrieker*. The siren blast from the device had the desired effect.

Baboons fled into the forest. The male leader bounded up, caught a low branch and swung into the cloaking darkness of the jungle.

The man, still spinning on the line, spotted her. "Hey! how about?"

Shay already had a machete in her other hand. She jumped atop a boulder and severed the hemp rope with one swipe of her weapon.

The man fell hard, striking the soft loam and rolling to the side. Amid a new string of curses, he struggled with the snare around his ankle. He finally freed the knotted rope.

"Goddamn apes!"

"Baboons," Shay corrected.

"What?"

"They're baboons, not apes. They have stubby tails."

"Whatever. All I saw were their big, goddamn teeth."

As the man stood and brushed off his knees, Shay spotted a U.S. Navy anchor tattooed on his right bicep. Ex-military? Maybe he could prove handy. Shay checked the time.

8:35 a.m.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"My boat broke down." His gaze traveled up and down her lithe form.

She was not unaccustomed to such attention from the male of her own species—even now, when she was unflatteringly dressed in green camouflage fatigues and sturdy boots. Her shoulder-length black hair had been efficiently bound behind her ears with a black bandanna, and in the tropical swelter, her skin glowed a dark mocha.

Caught staring, he glanced back toward the beach. "I swam here after my boat sank."

"Your boat sank?"

"Okay, it blew up."

She stared at him for further explanation.

"There was a gas leak. I dropped my cigar."

She waved away the rest of his words with her machete. Her pickup was scheduled at the northern peninsula in under a half hour. On that timetable, she had to reach the compound, break into the safe and obtain the vials of antidote. She set off into the jungle, noting a trail. The man followed, dragged along in her wake.

"Whoa! where are we going?"

She freed a rolled-up poncho from her daypack and passed it to him.

He struggled into it as he followed. "Name's Kowalski," he said. He got the poncho on backward and fought to work it around. "Do you have a boat? A way off this friggin' island?"

She didn't have time for subtlety. "In twenty-three minutes, the Brazilian navy is going to firebomb this atoll."

"What?" He checked his own wrist. He had no watch.

She continued, "An evac is scheduled for wheels up at 8:55 a.m. on the northern peninsula. But first I have to retrieve something from the island."

"Wait. Back up. Who's going to firebomb this shithole?"

"The Brazilian navy. In twenty-three minutes."

"Of course they are." He shook his head. "Of all the goddamn islands, I had to shag my ass onto one that's going to blow up."

Shay tuned out his diatribe. At least he kept moving. She had to give him that. He was either very brave or very dumb.

"Oh, look! a mango." He reached for the yellow fruit.

"Don't touch that."

"But I haven't eaten in?"

"All the vegetation on this island has been aerial sprayed with a transgenic rhabdovirus."

He lowered his hand.

"Once ingested, it stimulates the sensory centers of the brain, heightening a victim's senses. Sight, sound, smell, taste and touch."

"And what's wrong with that?"

"The process also corrupts the reticular apparatus of the cerebral cortex. Triggering manic rages."

A growling yowl echoed through the jungle behind them. It was answered by coughing grunts and howls from either flank.

"The apes?"

"Baboons. Yes, they're surely infected. Experimental subjects."

"Great. The Island of Rabid Baboons."

Ignoring him, she pointed toward a whitewashed hacienda sprawled atop the next hill, seen through a break in the foliage. "We need to reach that compound."

The terra-cotta-tiled structure had been leased by Professor Salazar for his research, funded by a shadowy organization of terrorist cells. Here on the isolated island, he had conducted the final stages of perfecting his bioweapon. Then two days ago, Sigma Force's covert U.S. science team specializing in global threats had captured the doctor in the heart of the Brazilian rain forest, but not before he had infected an entire Indian village outside of Manaus, including an international children's relief hospital.

The disease was already in its early stages, requiring the prompt quarantine of the village by the Brazilian army. The only hope was to obtain Professor Salazar's antidote, locked in the doctor's safe.

Or at least the vials *might* be there.

Salazar claimed to have destroyed his supply.

Upon this assertion, the Brazilian government had decided to take no chances. A storm was due to strike at dusk with hurricane-force winds. They feared the storm surge might carry the virus from the island to the mainland's coastal rain forest. It would take only a single infected leaf to

risk the entire equatorial rain forest. So the plan was to firebomb the small island, to burn its vegetation to the bedrock. The assault was set for zero nine hundred. The government could not be convinced that the remote possibility of a cure was worth the risk of a delay. Total annihilation was their plan. That included the Brazilian village. Acceptable losses.

Anger surged through her as she pictured Manuel Garrison, her partner. He had tried to evacuate the children's hospital, but he'd become trapped and subsequently infected. Along with all the children.

Acceptable losses were not in her vocabulary.

Not today.

So Shay had proceeded with her solo op. Parachuting from a high-altitude drop, she had radioed her plans while plummeting in free fall. Sigma command had agreed to send an emergency evac helicopter to the northern end of the island. It would touch down for one minute. Either she was on the chopper at that time—or she was dead.

The odds were fine with her.

But now she wasn't alone.

The side of beef tromped loudly behind her. Whistling. He was *whistling*. She turned to him. "Mr. Kowalski, do you remember my description of how the virus heightens a victim's sense of hearing?" Her quiet words crackled with irritation.

"Sorry." He glanced at the trail behind him.

"Careful of that tiger trap," she said, stepping around the crudely camouflaged hole.

"What?" His left foot fell squarely on the trapdoor of woven reeds. His weight shattered through it.

Shay shoulder-blocked the man to the side and landed atop him. It felt like falling on a pile of bricks. Only, bricks were smarter.

She pushed up. "After being snared, you'd think you'd watch where you were stepping! The whole place is one big booby trap."

She stood, straightened her pack and edged around the spike-lined pit. "Stay behind me. Step where I step."

In her anger, she missed the trip cord.

The only warning was a small *thwang*.

She jumped to the side but was too late. A tethered log swung from the forest and struck her knee. She heard the snap of her tibia, then went flying through the air—right toward the open maw of the tiger trap.

She twisted to avoid the pit's iron spikes. There was no hope.

Then she hit—bricks again.

Kowalski had lunged and blocked the hole with his own bulk. She rolled off him. Agony flared up her leg, through her hip, and exploded along her spine. Her vision narrowed to a pinprick, but not enough to miss the angled twist below her knee.

Kowalski gained her side. "Oh, man—oh, man—"

âLegâs broken,â she said, biting back the pain.

âWe can splint it.â

She checked her watch.

8:39 a.m.

Twenty-one minutes left.

He noted her attention. âI can carry you. We can still make it to the evac site.â

She recalculated in her head. She pictured Manuelâs shit-eating grinâand the many faces of the children. Pain worse than any broken bone coursed through her. She could not fail.

The man read her intent. âYouâll never make it to that house,â he said.

âI donât have any other choice.â

âThen let me do it,â he blurted out. His words seemed to surprise him as much as it did her, but he didnât retract them. âYou make for the beach. Iâll get whatever you want out of the goddamn hacienda.â

She turned and stared the stranger full in the face. She searched for something to give her hope. Some hidden strength, some underlying fortitude. She found nothing. But she had no other choice.

âThereâll be other traps.â

âIâll keep my eyes peeled this time.â

âAnd the office safeâI canât teach you to crack it in time.â

âDo you have an extra radio?â

She nodded.

âSo talk me through it once I get there.â

She hesitatedâbut there was no time for even that. She swung her pack around. âLean down.â

She reached to a side pocket of her pack and stripped out two self-adhesive patches. She attached one behind the manâs ear and the other over his Adamâs apple. âMicroreceiver and a subvocal transmitter.â

She quickly tested the radio while explaining the stakes involved.

âSo much for my relaxing vacation under the sun,â he mumbled.

âOne more thing,â she said. She pulled out three sections of a weapon from her pack. âA VK rifle. Variable Kinetic.â She quickly snapped the pieces together and shoved a fat cylindrical cartridge into place on its underside. It looked like a stubby assault rifle, except the barrel was wider and flattened horizontally.

âSafety release is here.â She pointed the weapon at a nearby bush and squeezed the trigger. There was only a tiny whirring cough. A projectile flashed out the barrel and buzzed through the bush, severing leaves and branches. âOne-inch razor-disks. You can set the weapon for single shot or automatic strafe.â She demonstrated. âTwo hundred shots per magazine.â

He whistled again and accepted the weapon. âMaybe you should keep this weed whacker. With your bum leg, youâre going to drag ass at a

snail's pace. He nodded to the jungle. And the damn apes are still out there.

They're baboons, and I still have my handheld shrieker. Now get going. She checked her watch. She had given Kowalski a second timepiece, calibrated to match. Nineteen minutes.

He nodded. I'll see you soon. He moved off the trail, vanishing almost instantly into the dense foliage.

Where are you going? she called after him. The trail.

Screw the trail, he responded through the radio. I'll take my chances in the raw jungle. Fewer traps. Plus, I've got this baby to carve a straight path to the mad doctor's house.

Shay hoped he was right. There would be no time for backtracking or second chances. She quickly dosed herself with a morphine injector and used a broken tree branch for a crutch. As she set off for the beach, she heard the ravenous hunting calls of the baboons.

She hoped Kowalski could outsmart them.

The thought drew a groan that had nothing to do with her broken leg.

* * *

Luckily Kowalski had a knife now.

He hung upside down for the second time that day. He bent at the waist, grabbed his trapped ankle and sawed through the snare's rope. It snapped with a *pop*. He fell, clenched in a ball, and crashed to the jungle floor with a loud *oof*.

What was that? Dr. Rosauro asked over the radio.

He straightened his limbs and lay on his back for a breath. Nothing, he growled. Just tripped on a rock. He scowled at the swinging rope overhead. He was not about to tell the beautiful woman doctor that he had been strung up again. He did have some pride left.

Goddamn snare, he mumbled under his breath.

What?

Nothing. He had forgotten about the sensitivity of the subvocal transmitter.

Snare? You snared yourself again, didn't you?

He kept silent. His momma once said, *It is better to keep your mouth shut and let people think you're a fool than to open it and remove all doubt.*

You need to watch where you're going, the woman scolded.

Kowalski bit back a retort. He heard the pain in her voice and her fear. So instead, he hauled back to his feet and retrieved his gun.

Seventeen minutes, Dr. Rosauro reminded him.

I'm just reaching the compound now.

The sun-bleached hacienda appeared like a calm oasis of civilization in a sea of nature's raw exuberance. It was straight lines and sterile order versus wild overgrowth and tangled fecundity. Three buildings sat on manicured acres, separated by breezeways, and nestled around a small

garden courtyard. A three-tiered Spanish fountain stood in the center, ornate with blue and red glass tiles. No water splashed through its basins.

Kowalski studied the compound, stretching a kink out of his back. The only movement across the cultivated grounds was the swaying fronds of some coconut palms. The winds were already rising with the approaching storm. Clouds stacked on the southern horizon.

“The office is on the main floor, near the back,” Rosauro said in his ear. “Careful of the electric perimeter fence. The power may still be on.”

He studied the chain-link fencing, almost eight feet tall, topped by a spiral of concertina wire and separated from the jungle by a burned swath about ten yards wide. No-man’s-land.

Or rather no-ape’s-land.

He picked up a broken branch and approached the fence. Wincing, he stretched one end toward the chain links. He was mindful of his bare feet. *Shouldn’t I be grounded for this?* He had no idea.

As the tip of his club struck the fence, a strident wail erupted. He jumped back, then realized the noise was not coming from the fence. It wailed off to his left, toward the water.

Dr. Rosauro’s shrieker.

“Are you all right?” Kowalski called into his transmitter.

A long stretch of silence had him holding his breath—then whispered words reached him. “The baboons must sense my injury. They’re converging on my location. Just get going.”

Kowalski poked his stick at the fence a few more times, like a child with a dead rat, making sure it was truly dead. Once satisfied, he snapped the concertina wire with clippers supplied by Dr. Rosauro and scurried over the fence, certain the power was just waiting to surge back with electric-blue death.

He dropped with a relieved sigh onto the mowed lawn, as bright and perfect as any golf course.

“You don’t have much time,” the doctor stressed needlessly. “If you’re successful, the rear gardens lead all the way to the beach. The northern headlands stretch out from there.”

Kowalski set out, aiming for the main building. A shift in wind brought the damp waft of rain—along with the stench of death, the ripeness of meat left out in the sun. He spotted the body on the far side of the fountain.

He circled the man’s form. The guy’s face had been gnawed to the bone, clothes shredded, belly slashed open, bloated intestines strung across the ground like festive streamers. It seemed the apes had been having their own party since the good doctor took off.

As he circled, he noted the black pistol clutched in the corpse’s hand. The slide had popped open. No more bullets. Not enough firepower to hold off a whole pack of the furry carnivores. Kowalski raised his own weapon to his shoulder. He searched the shadowed corners for any

hidden apes. There were not even any bodies. The shooter must either be a poor marksman, or the ruby-assed monkeys had hauled off their brethren's bodies, perhaps to eat later, like so much baboon takeout.

Kowalski made one complete circle. Nothing.

He crossed toward the main building. Something nagged at the edge of his awareness. He scratched his skull in an attempt to dislodge it but failed.

He climbed atop the full-length wooden porch and tried the door handle. Latched but unlocked. He shoved the door open with one foot, weapon raised, ready for a full-frontal ape assault.

The door swung wide, rebounded, and bounced back closed in his face.

Snorting in irritation, he grabbed the handle again. It wouldn't budge. He tugged harder.

Locked.

“You’ve got to be kidding.”

The collision must have jiggled some bolt into place.

“Are you inside yet?” Rosauo asked.

“Just about,” he grumbled.

“What’s the holdup?”

“Well, what happened was—” He tried sheepishness, but it fit him as well as fleece on a rhino. “I guess someone locked it.”

“Try a window.”

Kowalski glanced to the large windows that framed either side of the barred doorway. He stepped to the right and peered through. Inside was a rustic kitchen with oak tables, a farmer's sink and old enamel appliances. Good enough. Maybe they even had a bottle of beer in the fridge. A man could dream. But first there was work to do.

He stepped back, pointed his weapon and fired a single round. The silver razor-disk shattered through the pane as easily as any bullet. Fractures spattered out from the hole.

He grinned. Happy again.

He retreated another step, careful of the porch edge. He thumbed the switch to automatic fire and strafed out the remaining panes.

He poked his head through the hole. “Anyone home?”

That's when he saw the exposed wire snapping and spitting around a silver disk imbedded in the wall plaster. It had nicked through the electric cord. More disks were impaled across the far wall—including one that had punctured the gas line to the stove.

He didn't bother cursing.

He twisted and leaped as the explosion blasted behind him. A wall of superheated air shoved him out of the way, blowing his poncho over his head. He hit the ground rolling as a fireball swirled overhead, across the courtyard. Tangled in his poncho, he tumbled right into the eviscerated corpse. Limbs fought, heat burned, and scrambling fingers found only a

gelid belly wound and things that squished.

Gagging, Kowalski fought his way free and shoved the poncho off his body. He stood, shaking like a wet dog, swiping gore from his arms in disgust. He stared toward the main building.

Flames danced behind the kitchen window. Smoke choked out the shattered pane.

“What happened?” the doctor gasped in his ear.

He only shook his head. Flames spread, flowing out the broken window and lapping at the porch.

“Kowalski?”

“Booby trap. Iâm fine.”

He collected his weapon from his discarded poncho. Resting it on his shoulder, he intended to circle to the back. According to Dr. Rosauro, the main office was in the rear.

If he worked quickly

He checked his watch.

8:45 a.m.

It was hero time.

He stepped toward the north side of the hacienda. His bare heel slipped on a loop of intestine, slick as any banana peel. His leg twisted out from under him. He tumbled face-first, striking hard, the weapon slamming to the packed dirt, his finger jamming the trigger.

Silver disks flashed out and struck the figure lumbering into the courtyard, one arm on fire. It howledânot in agony, but in feral rage. The figure wore the tatters of a butlerâs attire. His eyes were fever bright but mucked with pasty matter. Froth speckled and drooled from lips rippled in a snarl. Blood stained the lower half of his face and drenched the front of his once-starched white shirt.

In a flash of insightâa rarityâKowalski realized what had been nagging him before. The lack of monkey corpses here. Heâd assumed the monkeys had been cannibalizedâif so, then why leave a perfectly good chunk of meat out here?

The answer: no apes had attacked here.

It seemed the beasts were not the only ones infected on the island.

Nor the only cannibals.

The butler, still on fire, lunged toward Kowalski. The first impacts of the silver disks had struck shoulder and neck. Blood sprayed. Not enough to stop the determined maniac.

Kowalski squeezed the trigger, aiming low.

An arc of razored death sliced across the space at knee height.

Tendons snapped, bones shattered. The butler collapsed and fell toward Kowalski, landing almost nose to nose with him. A clawed hand grabbed his throat, nails digging into his flesh. Kowalski raised the muzzle of his VK rifle.

“Sorry, buddy.”

Kowalski aimed for the open mouth and pulled the trigger, closing his eyes at the last second.

A gargling yowl eruptedâthen went immediately silent. His throat was released.

Kowalski opened his eyes to see the butler collapse face-first.

Dead.

Kowalski rolled to the side and gained his legs. He searched around for any other attackers, then ran toward the back of the hacienda. He glanced in each window as he passed: a locker room, a lab with steel animal cages, a billiard room.

Fire roared on the structureâs far side, fanned by the growing winds. Smoke churned up into the darkening skies.

Through the next window, Kowalski spotted a room with a massive wooden desk and floor-to-ceiling bookshelves.

It had to be the professorâs study.

âDr. Rosauro,â Kowalski whispered.

No answer.

âDr. Rosauroâ he tried a little louder.

He grabbed his throat. His transmitter was gone, ripped away in his scuffle with the butler. He glanced back toward the courtyard. Flames lapped the sky.

He was on his own.

He turned back to the study. A rear door opened into the room. It stood ajar.

Why did that not sit well with him?

With time strangling, Kowalski edged cautiously forward, gun raised. He used the tip of his weapon to nudge the door wider.

He was ready for anything.

Rabid baboons, raving butlers.

But not for the young woman in a skintight charcoal wet suit.

She was crouched before an open floor safe and rose smoothly with the creak of the door, a pack slung over one shoulder. Her hair, loose and damp, flowed as dark as a ravenâs wing, her skin burnt honey. Eyes, the smoky hue of dark caramel, met his.

Over a silver 9mm Sig-Sauer held in one fist.

Kowalski ducked to the side of the doorway, keeping his weapon pointed inside. âWho the hell are you?â

âMy name, *seÂ ± or*, is Condeza Gabriella Salazar. You are trespassing on my husbandâs property.â

Kowalski scowled. The professorâs wife. Why did all the pretty ones go for the smart guys?

âWhat are you doing here?â he called out.

âYou are American, sÂ? Sigma Force, no doubt.â This last was said with a sneer. âIâve come to collect my husbandâs cure. I will use it to barter for my *marido*âs freedom. You will not stop me.â

A blast of her gun chewed a hole through the door. Splinters chased him back.

Something about the easy way she had handled her pistol suggested more than competence. Plus, if sheâd married a professor, she probably had a few IQ points on him.

Brains and a body like thatâ|

Life was not fair.

Kowalski backed away, covering the side door.

A window shattered by his ear. A bullet seared past the back of his neck. He dropped and pressed against the adobe wall.

The bitch had moved out of the office and was stalking him from inside the house.

Body, brains, *and* she knew the lay of the land.

No wonder sheâd been able to avoid the monsters here.

Distantly a noise intruded. The *whump-whump* of an approaching helicopter. It was their evac chopper. He glanced to his watch. Of course their ride was early.

âYou should run for your friends,â the woman called from inside.

âWhile you still have time!â

Kowalski stared at the manicured lawn that spread all the way to the beach. There was no cover. The bitch would surely drop him within a few steps.

It came down to do or die.

He bunched his legs under him, took a deep breath, then sprang up. He crashed back-first through the bullet-weakened window. He kept his rifle tucked to his belly. He landed hard and shoulder-rolled, ignoring the shards of glass cutting him.

He gained a crouched position, rifle up, swiveling.

The room was empty.

Gone again.

So it was to be a cat-and-mouse hunt through the house.

He moved to the doorway that led deeper into the structure. Smoke flowed in rivers across the ceiling. The temperature inside was furnace hot. He pictured the pack over the womanâs shoulder. She had already emptied the safe. She would make for one of the exits.

He edged to the next room.

A sunroom. A wall of windows overlooked the expanse of gardens and lawn. Rattan furniture and floor screens offered a handful of hiding places. He would have to lure her out somehow. Outthink her.

Yeah, right.

He edged into the room, keeping close to the back wall.

He crossed the room. There was no attack.

He reached the far archway. It led to a back foyer.

And an open door.

He cursed inwardly. As he made his entrance, she must have made her

exit. She was probably halfway to Honduras by now. He rushed the door and out to the back porch. He searched the grounds.

Gone.

So much for outthinking her.

The press of the hot barrel against the back of his skull punctuated how thick that skull actually was. As he had concluded earlier, she must have realized a sprint across open ground was too risky. So she had waited to ambush him.

She didn't even hesitate for any witty repartee—not that he'd be a good sparring partner anyway. Only a single word of consolation was offered. *âAdiÃ's.â*

The blast of the gun was drowned by a sudden siren's wail.

Both of them jumped at the shrieking burst.

Luckily, he jumped to the left, she to the right.

The round tore through Kowalski's right ear with a lance of fire.

He spun, pulling the trigger on his weapon. He didn't aim, just clenched the trigger and strafed at waist level. He lost his balance at the edge of the porch, tumbling back.

Another bullet ripped through the air past the tip of his nose.

He hit the cobbled path, and his skull struck with a distinct ring. The rifle was knocked from his fingers.

He searched up and saw the woman step to the edge of the porch.

She pointed her Sig-Sauer at him.

Her other arm clutched her stomach. It failed to act as a dam.

Abdominal contents spilled from her split belly, pouring out in a flow of dark blood. She lifted her gun, arm trembling—her eyes met his, oddly surprised. Then the gun slipped from her fingers, and she toppled toward him.

Kowalski rolled out of the way in time.

She landed with a wet slap on the stone path.

The bell-beat of the helicopter wafted louder as the winds changed direction. The storm was rolling in fast. He saw the chopper circle the beach once, like a dog settling for a place to sleep, then lower toward the flat rocky expanse.

Kowalski returned to Gabriella Salazar's body and hauled off her pack. He began to sprint for the beach. Then stopped, went back, and retrieved his VK rifle. He wasn't leaving it behind.

As he ran, he realized two things.

One. The siren blast from the neighboring jungle had gone silent. And two. He had heard not a single word from Dr. Rosauero. He checked the taped receiver behind his ear. Still in place.

Why had she gone silent?

The helicopter—a Sikorsky S-76—touched down ahead of him. Sand swirled in the rotorwash. A gunman in military fatigues pointed a rifle at him and bellowed over the roar of the blades.

Stand down! Now!

Kowalski stopped. He lowered his rifle but lifted the pack. I have the goddamn antidote.

He searched the surrounding beach for Dr. Rosauro, but she was nowhere in sight.

Seaman Joe Kowalski! U.S. Navy! I'm helping Dr. Rosauro!

After a moment of consultation with someone inside the chopper, the gunman waved him forward. Ducking under the rotors, Kowalski held out the satchel. A shadowy figure accepted the pack and searched inside. Something was exchanged by radio.

Where's Dr. Rosauro? the stranger asked, clearly the one in charge here. Hard blue eyes studied him.

Kowalski shook his head.

Commander Crowe, the pilot called back. We must leave now. The Brazilian navy had just ordered the bombardment.

Get inside, the man ordered Kowalski, the tone unequivocal.

Kowalski stepped toward the open door.

A shrieking wail stopped him. A single short burst. It came from beyond the beach.

In the jungle.

* * *

Dr. Shay Rosauro clung to the tangle of branches halfway up the broad-leaved cocoa tree. Baboons gibbered below. She had sustained a deep bite to her calf, lost her radio and her pack.

Minutes ago, after being chased into the tree, she had found that her perch offered a bird's-eye view of the hacienda, good enough to observe Kowalski being led out at gunpoint. Unable to help, she had used the only weapon still at hand—her sonic shrieker.

Unfortunately, the blast had panicked the baboons below her, their sudden flight jostling her branch. She'd lost her balance—and the shrieker. As she'd regained her balance, she'd heard two gunshots.

Hope died inside her.

Below, one of the baboons, the dominant male of the pack, had recovered her sonic device and discovered the siren button. The blast momentarily scattered the pack. But only momentarily. The deterrent was becoming progressively less effective—only making them angrier.

Shay hugged the tree trunk.

She checked her watch, then closed her eyes.

She pictured the children's faces—her partner's—

A noise drew her attention upward. The double *whump* of a passing helicopter. The leaves whipped around her. She lifted an arm—then lowered it.

Too late.

The chopper lifted away. The Brazilian assault would commence in a

matter of seconds. Shay let her club, her only remaining weapon, drop from her fingers. What was the use? It tumbled below, doing nothing but drawing the attention of the baboons. The pack renewed its assault, climbing the lowest branches.

She could only watch.

Then a familiar voice intruded.

âDie, you dirty, rabid, motherfucking apes!â

A large figure appeared below, blazing out with a VK rifle.

Baboons screamed. Fur flew. Blood splattered.

Kowalski strode into the fray, back to nothing but his boxers.

And his weapon.

He strafed and fired, spinning, turning, twisting, dropping.

Baboons fled now.

Except for their leader. The male rose up and howled as loudly as Kowalski, baring long fangs. Kowalski matched his expression, showing as many teeth.

âShut the hell up!â

Kowalski punctuated his declaration with a continuous burst of firepower, turning monkey into mulch. Once finished, he shouldered his rifle and strode forward. Leaning on the trunk, he stared up.

âReady to come down, Doctor?â

Relieved, Shay half fell out of the tree. Kowalski caught her.

âThe antidoteâ?â she asked.

âIn safe hands,â he assured her. âOn its way to the coast with Commander Crowe. He wanted me to come along, but wellâ!âI guess I owed you.â

He supported her under one shoulder. They hobbled quickly out of the jungle to the open beach.

âHow are we going to get offâ?â

âIâve got that covered. Seems a nice lady left us a going-away present.â He pointed down the strand to a beached Jet Ski. âLucky for us, Gabriella Salazar loved her husband enough to come out here.â

As they hurried to the watercraftâs side, he gently helped her on board, then climbed in front.

She circled her arms around his waist. She noted his bloody ear and weeping lacerations across his back. More scars to add to his collection. She closed her eyes and leaned her cheek against his bare back. Grateful and exhausted.

âAnd speaking of the love of oneâs life,â he said, igniting the watercraftâs engine and throttling it up. He glanced back. âI may be falling in love, tooâ!â

She lifted her head, startled, then leaned back down.

Relieved.

Kowalski was just staring at his shouldered rifle.

âOh, yeah,â he said. âThis babyâs a real keeper.â

* * * * *

Author Biography

James Rollins is a *New York Times* bestselling author of numerous thrillers, including *Map of Bones*. You'll often find him underground or underwater as an amateur caver and scuba diver. From these hobbies sprang his earlier thrillers *Subterranean*, *Amazonia* and *Ice Hunt*, and *Sandstorm*, the first book in his Sigma Force series that is now fifteen strong. Find more at jamesrollins.com.



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Kowalski in Love

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